

BEATING SHOES

POEMS

by

W. H. COATES

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Poems

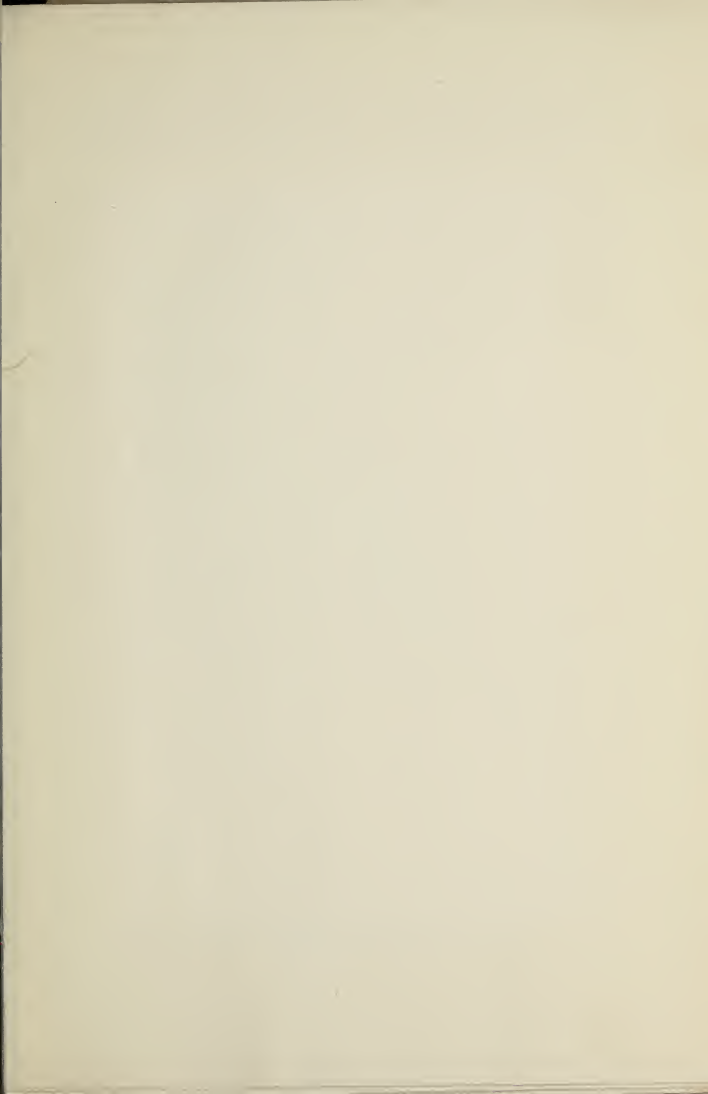
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W. H. Coates

HEATH CRANTON LIMITED
6 FLEET LANE, LONDON, E.C.4

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

c.1


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NOTE

THERE is one physical fact which the reader must know if he would understand the following pieces fully : their author has been blind nearly all his life. That is why in these pages the World becomes a complex of sound, touch and smell. No commiseration is called for on this account, because a mind cut off from visual forms will find greater value and significance in what remains.

Acknowledgments :

To the Proprietors of *John o' London's Weekly* for permission to reprint "Solitude."

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W. H. C.

1939.

THE FIRST ADVENTURE

Stood at the door a child
The enchanted World to greet ;
The april country smiled,
The wind was light and sweet,
And the broad desirable road that rolled
Away away to the hills of gold
Bewitched his new-shod feet.

Behind him he could feel
Familiar corners sigh,
The sill detain his heel,
The toys forlornly cry :
Through empty rooms, on quiet stair,
Hovered the voice of mother-care
Pleading a lullaby.

But the clock had struck the hour ;
The gate clicked, he was out ;
He ran with all his power—
Jumped into Life with a shout . . .
His voice, so piercing-shrill and brave,
Was faintly echoed by the grave
Old woodlands round about.

TOUCH-LANDSCAPE

I climbed the long smooth lift of the road
 To reach the top of the hill,
And turned me round to feel on face and
 hands
 The gentle morning sunshine.

Long and sweet was the breath I there drew
 in
 Of that enchanted hour :
Folded my heart in pastoral quietness
 That lay on hill and vale
 By singing birds adorned.

Then stepped my fancy out over the scene.
 Through stiff bracken she waded,
 The turf caressed her feet,
The ground flowed away in broad slopes towards
 the valley.

She heard the shadow-sound of trees ;
Her hands brushed the fields—a thousand acres—
 To touch the distant wood
 Flung like a scarf of lace
 Upon the knees of the hills.

She buried her feet in grasses rich and cool
 When to the plain she leapt
 Beside a level river—
A polished strip of metal cutting the pastures.

And thence to farther hills
Swelling beneath my disembodied hands
In three-dimensional curves ;—
Most lovely hills, phantom and far away
And overlaid with velvet.

And farther yet, beyond the misty hills,
I reached the wrinkled sea ;—
I touched the waves with crests of thistledown.

OFF THE MAP

Empty is the crooked lane ;
Sleep has a cool abode
In the shade of tall hedges
From the railway-halt to the road.

But once this place was startled
Each morning in cold or heat
By shouts of children's laughter
And the rattle of running feet.

They came on winter mornings
When the thorn was drenched and bare,
Ignoring mud and water,
Scorning the cane of the air :

Or trying to count the whitethroats
When larks had nests in the wheat
And beans were out in blossom,
Dogrose, or meadowsweet.

Up on the windy halt
Gathered the small rebels,
Swarmed on the permanent way,
Pelted the telegraph wires,
Grubbed about the embankment
For smooth sea-ground pebbles.

Then came the motor-train—
Creaking, shuffling, wheezing,
And Charley opened the door—

(That quiet sour old man
Now beyond all teasing.)

And in bundled the children
With pencil book and rule
And merry morning voices,
And puffed away to school.

But now they pass the turning
To the quiet shady lane
In Jonah Ferris's bus ;
And nobody wants the train.

And nobody knows the halt
Whose planks are rotting fast,
But the black-coated rooks
So gravely sailing past.

BLACKCAP

That curly song !
That pirouette of sound !
A dulcet ring of bells that round and round
Go " Dong ding-a-dong ding-dong."

What is it the ear misses
As I listen under the tree,
Lying on the ground ?

I think, the recoil of longing in ecstasy . . .

Because his bliss is
One that knows not the abysses.

He is all sweetness without fire—
Habitual gaiety—
Fulfilment immediately crowned
Remembering not the desire.

BLACKBIRD

All the painted passion of Spring
Blackbird you sing.

Must I endure that song
So long,
Luring me away?—

That wild note spating, vibrating in your throat,
Capturing the moment, shaking the spirit's poise
With the triumph of sensual joys . . .
Until July in its burning arch
Parches it dry.

Out of the ground bubbles the sound like water :
Out of the dumb ground
In a quarter from which blow my unbidden
dreams :—

A hinterland abandoned, forgotten,
Of rotten woods and hidden laughing streams.

I live in the country of the three crownless kings—
Here is knowledge, the keenest cruellest of the three,
And form who forces the nature of all things,
And here the foundling prince morality.
To these I have given my word, Blackbird, my will ;
And yet from the barren hill
Back to the rich valley I hark, and again
Comes over me the pain,
The delight, the surprise,
Of hearing a sudden song rise,
Flicker, vanish in the babble of the dawn ;

Of a whiff of scent in the wind, given, withdrawn ;
Of plants you find in the dell, at the side of the wood.
Here in the land of the wise and good
Is there any snatch of impassioned beauty winging ?
Any well of water singing ?
Can it for Moses' rod
Splash from the heart of granite ?

THE POPLAR

When your body signals to mine
 (O lovely—O desirable !)
With the secret sign of the body,
The blood undeniable hisses in my ears
“ This is the beauty of Life—its riches :
 Follow it—follow it
 However the soul fears
 And the mind cries ‘ Hollow ! ’—
Follow the feet that entice in the scented alley,
Turn from the snow-line to the happy valley.”

When on a dusty afternoon
The birds dream of showers, bees croon
 And men for heat exclaim,
 I come to a cool place
Where shadow blesses my hot face,
And out of a leafy heaven high uplifted
Upon the spirit more than the ear is sifted
 A sound that has no name.

What shall I call the dry sound
That the wind winnows from the poplar
 tree?—
That the wind scatters like sand around
Out of remote serenity—
Like fine sand that is washed and washed in mountain
streams :—
That faint sub-aspirate level speech
Without the vowel’s blatancy,

The final statement Life may reach
From resonance of passion free,
Free from the urgent stress and rhythm of nightmare
dreams ?

Chastity shall I call it ?
The Denial of Life—the Ascetic ?
The Great Negation ?
Or some transcendent Affirmation ?
Or shall I call it
The form without the substance—bodiless music ?

Say no more : I have heard
The stiff unmerciful voice ; I find
Lying on the littered floor of my mind
A hard glittering word—
RENUNCIATION . . .
RENUNCIATION . . .

For on one hand the body's touch
Coaxes me back to the law of the blood ;
Through flowery lanes to a dim wood
Where satyrs leer and grin between the leaves ;
Where slink insidious spiritual thieves ;
Where claws catch and fists clutch
Convulsively tightening ;
Where Life and Death are sudden, lurid, like
lightning :

On the other hand the inviolate poplar's call
Bids me across the hill.
There Beauty is clean—

The sough of wind on a bare wall,
The smooth motion of a strong machine,
The joyful waterfall,
Starlings' wings in Winter rustling white ;
The sputtering flame is frozen marble-still,
And heat is changed into light :

There, my heart is a quiet pool of water, echoing all.

THE RETURN TO OTMOOR

Lightly I left the city,
Having long been rolled round and buffeted and
jerked

In its immense gyrations.

Secure in self-content
I came back to the old soil—
To those deep pools of silence where my childhood
drank,
To the natural air, with no fumes
But the spice of autumn woods
And moist earth.

Bravely I swaggered it down the hill,
Wading through leaves, careless of ruts,
Until to the bridge I came . . .
And to the tree
That hisses in all weathers, never ceasing.

And there I paused : . . .
Ay, my heart knew
That once you've passed that hissing tree
You slip into a faery land.

But I passed the Hissing-tree,
And round me like a wall
Closed Otmoor.

Otmoor shut out the steely glaring world,
And gave again its silence dank and cold
Still charged with bygone adolescent dreams—
My dreams of mystery and vague romance.

With all the old allurements they thronged upon me,
The loves, the desires, the fancies,
The eager tentative ramblings,
Of a solitary boyhood ;
They charmed away my world of glittering facts.

It was night-time ;
Wind bowed the seeded thistles,
Wrested the lank hedge ;
A lone cow was grazing amid her dung
Upon the sodden grass.

“ Cold air, mud, silence, shadows, thorns, nastiness :—

Repulsive ! ”

Thus I resisted
With the squeamishness of trim Suburbia.

But all around me spirits and elves leapt up,
With fugitive beckonings—
Beckonings towards some secret grassy place
Filled with the whisper of unearthly feet.

Dizzy I grew, bewildered ;
I who was proud and wise ;
Who cherished my disillusionment !

And Otmoor put out her hands—
Her cold rough hands to catch me ;
And muttered, “ Quiet—quiet !
You are mine ! you are mine !
Of my clay.”

THE HERON SPEAKS

I am the Heron—the shy one
Living alone by the water—
Wild in the wild waste, by muddy water.

The summer days may burn and the nights freeze,
But these will never hurt me ;
Though hail bruise or lightning prick
It cannot avail :
Only the ones you love can find the quick.

In Spring I went to the wood ; I had to dare it
For the ancient Heron of Herons, who pinches the
belly,
Claiming his annual tax of the life and the spirit :

But that was soon done.
Now I perch on an old post,
To keep my skin from snags.
And the wind clashes the blades of the flags
And the marshy ground steams in the Sun
And none loves me and I love none,
And that's my boast.

So leave the queer Heron—
Legs in the water, wings in the light,
Preoccupied.
He has lived too long and knows too much
To expect happiness . . .
. . . Just tranquillity.

SOLITUDE

I stand in a mystic circle ;—
A tract of cold silence,
Whose rim—the listening ear's far horizon—
Invisibly curves through miles of empty night.

In this enchanted ring
Are all sounds dear—
The short simple sounds
That flicker here and there ;—
They speak some thought of the breadth and height
of things,
And strange austere poetic symbols fill
This world of common noises.

The hollow note of a woodland owl,
The bark of a dog,
The flute-like whistle of passing trains
Four miles away,
The fleeting hum of a car along some road
That lies a tangent upon my circle's edge :
—They come with a new power
Out of original silence ;
They are rare voices enriched
With meaning beyond my ear ;
Though but the jingling jargon of crowded days,
They become faint monosyllables of God's truth.

A cold calm is about me,
The voices speak in my soul ;
I am released from the bonds of banality,
From the flat boredom of towns :
I can turn once more to faith in God and Man.

OBJECTS

So full is the World of Objects
That value is lost in the glut of what might be
valued.

Hurrying crowding they jostle the senses,
Shouting gesticulating hammering at the doors,
Demanding acquaintance.

Each passing Object greets us, we reply.
Perceiving we take and give.
When a thing is lighted up with sudden beauty
Surely it is from us that the flash comes.

Are we not played upon by a delirious musician
Who wears us out ?

But an Object may grow apart from the scampering
procession—

And untrammelled existence :
Then you go out to it,
Fasten upon it with utmost attention,
Pierce to the heart of its individuality,
Make it a loophole cut in a prison wall
Through which the spirit may fly.

I have known a single great tree in a field
That gave a gracious blessing of shade to my head
And folded me safe in its strength and quietness of
boughs.

I have seen the stature and touched the steadfast
limbs
Of one whose will was firm and faith sincere
In a hostile land.

See : the whole glory of May
Transfigures that one robin—so small—
Who lifts his thin song in a fir-tree
To the mid-winter wastes.

THISTLE

The whole may be greater than the sum of its parts.

Your stubborn root is fastened deep
 In iron clay ;
Your sharp forbidding leaves you keep
 In ranked array
Of spears to guard the stately stem
 That sways with them
In the slow airs of an August day.

That stem is tipped with blossom sweet
 Which the bee knows
And moth remembers when the heat
 Of day goes,
Or wears an unsubstantial crown
 Of thistledown
Softer than freshly-fallen snows.

All this is you, and more than this,—
 Your image keen—
Your personal chord—your synthesis—
 The sprite unseen
Yet seen—not flower nor leaf nor stem
 But all of them—
An inaccessible virgin queen.

A WALK

MESOPOTAMIA AT OXFORD

I hear footsteps tramping past the cricket ground
Where patient mower rides with grinding jingling
 sound,
Down to the thin smell of the lime, that drifts and
 floats,
Past the rooks' palaver and the starlings chuckling
 in their throats,
 Into a space of quiet weather
 Where thorns and willows whisper together.

Here a single poplar its spirit music makes,
Chilling the lower air with austere domination ;
And behind that vestal singing a heavier tone
 vibrates,
Quickening the slow Earth with masculine diapason ;
 And over the narrow sluice
 Travel the beating shoes,
Passing between the tree above and the water below
 As must the human mind
 Its threadlike theme unwind
Among confused elemental voices that fall and
 flow
Around its crooked track, in front, behind.

Through the crescendo, through the diminuendo
they go—
 Heels hard on gravel path clapping—
 (Time's endless tapping),

Muffled heels on wooden bridge thumping
Like heart in body pumping :
Always the same rhythm—the same—always the
same,
Fading backwards towards the silence from which
they came,
Forwards beyond the cooing of wild pigeons fading
Into a street of unawakened echoes. . . .

ENCOUNTER WITH A WREN

If only a bustling wind would blow
 This burning day !
Fan my face and bathe my limbs
And lift this load of heat away.

I wish I could take off all my clothes—
 Into the ditch with 'em !
Trousers coat and underwear too—
Over the hedge and play at pitch with 'em !

How I would laugh and shake myself
 And doglike run,
Merry in freedom suddenly found
And body's joy of the air and Sun. . . .

But no : . . . still I am clothed and sweating and
 decent,
 And a simple Wren—
 My envy—my delight—
He sits in a cool covert and sings,
Out of sight, a mocker of men.

A stinging spurt of fairy shot
 From deepest cache ;
A tiny jet of icy water—
 Delicious splash !

Padded and fortified in thick
 Sartorial pomposity,

I have to praise him as I can
With lumbering verbosity.

He makes absurd this civilisation
That puffs and peeves—
He in his light shirt of feathers,
His world of leaves.

AMENITIES

Out of the town the wires were led,
Over the fields, along the lane,
On pole or pylon overhead
Quivering across the pastoral plain.

Light for the village, power for the farms,
And the gaffers' jaws in wonder drop ;
Miss Primbone—she's got burglar-alarms,
And screaming bells invade the shop.

A vacuum-cleaner whines in the manor,
In front of the church a street-lamp burns,
They phone to the doctor for Amos Tanner
When he has one of his nasty turns.

And all the time a vagrant breeze
Goes mourning through the wires outside
Like something starved and ill at ease
That the ages have not satisfied.

THE BASKET-MAKERS

In this sub-human age are still a few
Whose craft befits a man's endeavour, pays
Love with delight and skilful hands with praise
Which weave the inward pattern into view.

Their laugh is free, an echo ringing through
The years ; their willows tapping swishing raise
Unnumbered ghosts to whisper of larger days
When men were makers, called to conceive and do.

Though economic law with distant sound
Of thunder bodes defeat, they hold their post—
These last battalions of a perished host—
Whistling and unafraid, while rattling round
Their gay defence, enslaving, closing in,
Grinds in implacable siege the dead machine.

AEROPLANES

The air vibrates with the iron voice of the iron
Gods :—

 The horsepower, streamline Gods—
 Gods of war and greed,
 Of pride, force, violence, speed—
Turbulent Gods who will one day snap us like hazel
 rods.

Where is the hum of a thousand bees in the chestnut
 tree,

 The evening call of the rook,
 The whisper of winds, the laugh of a brook,
And where my brother's voice that quietly talked
 with me ?

Familiar tones of peace are crushed beneath the
 weight

 Of a sky that bellies low with noise,
 With the baying of fierce joys,
 Of beauty that bombs, grace that destroys,
Signifying the passions of men—the rancour, the
 hate.

Signifying the hate, the ruthlessness, the fear,
 Big with destruction fire and poison
 Booming loud-mouthed from horizon to
 horizon

The strong, the swift, the terribly beautiful furies
 appear.

Is this our triumph then—our faith—our challenge
given—

That a disordered civilisation
Should cause the Sky to harden
With sound, and threaten the Earth's
foundation ?

Is this the only way we could find of climbing
heaven ?

God have mercy upon us ! God have pity and
pardon !

SCIENCE

I have passed the last forlorn and twisted tree
To the edge of the World.

Here the weary winds run
To and fro for evermore,
Here the sad salt waves
Rave and roar on blown sands and shifting stones.

I wandered over many a fruitless mile
To find my sabbath peace—
My sanction of faith, answer to all my need ;
I found indeed a cluster of gems,
Lumps of ore, a seam,
But where the one pervasive lustre and glory !

I watched the whirling atoms,
Flaring nebulae whirling in farthest space,
The forms and ways of life ;
Upon the dark and dusty stairs of my mind
The hollow echo of my own feet was fear.

Beauty that had no meaning, Law no purpose,
Power hurling the massive planets in circles :—
A blank forsaken world.

And so forwandered, alone,
Passed the last of hope's greenery,
I come to the uttermost shore.

Unanswered lie my questions—lies my zeal.
My instruments are sunk beneath the sea
Whose sullen voice is neither affirmation
Nor yet denial.

Here with an empty heart
I sit on a windy dune,
And the insignificant continents of Nature
Sift through my lax fingers—
A handful of sand.

PHYSICS

Beware of logic !
Logic in the light is a staunch guard of truth . .
In the dark may lead to the Devil.

Our knowledge is partly moonshine—
Beams, shadows and curious clouds—
Symbols of something alien afar,
Utterly separate.

We tried to catch the rain in a sieve ;
Substance crumbled even as the hand was stretched
to grasp it,
Space and time were twisted into the inconceivable,
The heavens—the majesty of the
heavens—
Became a black formula scrawled across a page.

We sent an expedition out of the city
To seize the thing unknown and lead it captive,
And valiant was the journey, keen the watch :
But who can approach the unapproach-
able ?
So now in desert sand where lie the perished
seekers
The mathematician raising his mausoleum of
ciphers
Commemorates the suicide of the disappointed
mechanic
And the immortality of human ignorance.

.

Hell rocks with Mephistophelian laughter
While reason prods and quizzes, lists and labels
A heap of sealed parcels . . . :
Logic in the dark is the Devil's jester.

Grave and glib as a talkative child
Holding forth in the British Museum,
It can throw up a thousand airy theories,
Spin you a mile of syllogisms
Embodying lies more swollen than all the spiral
nebulæ,
And, for conclusion, trumpeting the final damnation
of Man.

“ If A is B——”

But that colossal If bestrides the whole discussion,
Dwarfing it to a mere excited squeak in a dark
corner.

ASTRONOMY

It is cold unfathomable night
Beyond the round fence ;
Breadth and depth and height
Vanish in bare immense.
There Death and terror are ;
Distance that cracks the brain,
Calculation that crushes,
Regions that wear no stain
Of human thought or sense ;
While through the blackness rushes
Some blazing foreign star.

Pack up the telescope !
Smother the sharp desire,
Escape those gulfs—defeat
Their magnetism of fear.
Brothers all, what cheer !
With icy fingers grope
Back to the old camp fire.
Set up a merry clack—
A song—a tale—some dope ;
Forget the shivers ; beat
That creeping silence back.

O THOU TO WHOM WE PRAY

O thou to whom we pray,
Let us not doubt thy love,
Even if we doubt thy power.
Didst thou not reign above
Each atom in the clay,
Each droplet in the shower,
Each secret germ in the vein,
Yet still we should not cower
Before Hell's anarchy
And the blind assaults of pain,
Our joy would still remain
(So fitful though it be)
To weave thy harmony
And serve with hand and brain.

But were thy love a lie—
The love by which we live,
How desperate and lonely
Were man ! for no reply
But jeering echoes only
The alien world could give
To him, who talks of grace,
Who seeks thee through the deeps—
(Thou couldst not meet his face !)—
Who prophesies and weeps,
The universal gull.
The final frost that creeps
Out of the abyss of space
Should shrivel all the race
And all its dreams annul.

So let thy love shine forth ;
Do not thyself conceal,
Even as thy power is known.
Show it from South to North
In stock and star and stone
And in the love we feel :—
O unifier of all,
The living Christ reveal
In what we think our own ;
That still we may thee call
Our Father and our King
Who laugheth in our Spring
And careth when we fall
And draweth us to his throne.

CAROL-SINGERS

Along the rows of muffled houses
The children sing from door to door,
Fumbling at gates, flashing their torches,
Bravely lifting their reedy treble
Into the silent spacious night.

Now we remember our Love, our Joy :
The eternal babe of Bethlehem—
He cometh out of the cold and wet
Into the circle of human light :
He lieth again in a manger warm.

O Babe, who lonely through the year
Wast crucified on the barren hills ;
Whose message came like a homeless wind,
Shaking our windows, and we were asleep ;—
Dear Babe, we adore thee now for a day !

THE DREAM

What is your new dream of beauty—tell me ?

It is this :

A thousand strong cars
Sliding one by one—
A swift river of sound
Flowing along the smooth and quiet road.

No more :

Just the level murmuring voice of power controlled,
The snaky stealth of speed,
The purring harmony of faultless gear
Resolving faithfully
The rude frenzy of exploding gases
Into the steady spinning of a wheel
And thus glides away all sound into silence.

REST

Now the soft-footed hour,
Cool-handed, like a nurse,
Out of our daytime places
Draws us all to her will :
The honey-bee from the flower,
The poet from his verse,
The runner from his races,
The landlord from his till ;
The better and the worse
She covers with her graces,
And bathes with gentle sleep their heated faces.

Latched is now the gate,
And muffled all the fun,
The fire dies down,
The servant-girl is free ;
And gears cease to grate,
And wheels no longer run,
For quiet is the town
And quiet every tree,
And the Earth turns from the Sun
Beyond the Stars to see
Where dim Night touches Eternity.



